Gold Hill Communications Site for T-Mobile
E.A. OR-035-04-03
OR-57803

I. Introduction

A. Purpose and Need for Proposed Action

T-Mobile/VoiceStream Wireless has made application for a right-of-way for the construction, use, and maintenance of a cellular phone communications tower to be built next to the existing US Cellular communication site located on Gold Hill near Durkee, Oregon. The site would be approximately 30' x 30 '. Located on the site would be a 75' monopole with a radio cabinet mounted on a 10' x 15' concrete slab. This would be a new communication facility.

The purpose of the project is to fill in gaps in cell coverage along Interstate Highway 84 between Pendleton and Ontario, Oregon, and thus improve telephone communications along the route. Service is presently undependable along that portion of the highway. This site was chosen because of its location and ability to provide the needed coverage, good access, and relatively close electric power source.

The BLM managed lands are located in Township T. 12S., Range R. 43E., Section 1; SW ¼ W ½ SE ¼ and Section 12; NW ¼ NE ¼ , NE ¼ NW ¼ of the Willamette Meridian, Baker County, Oregon.

B. Relationship to Planning Documents

The project area is covered by the Baker Resource Management Plan. Rights-of-way management direction is that public lands are available for rights-of-way, including communication sites, unless the location is within certain exclusion/avoidance areas (see page 23 of the RMP). The proposed project would not be located within any of these exclusion/avoidance areas. Applicants are to be encouraged to locate new facilities adjacent to existing facilities and sites to the extent technically and economically feasible, but new sites are not precluded.

The project location is within the Baker County Geographic Unit of the Baker RMP area. Lands guidance for this unit is that public lands are available for local rights-of-way (page 117).

Baker County has zoned the area as Exclusive Farm Use. This type of facility is considered to be a local right-of-way and is therefore an outright permitted use.

C. Laws and Statutes Affecting the Proposal

This action would be appropriately authorized under Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, and regulations at 43 CFR 2800. Additionally, the applicant must comply with regulations of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and regulations of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regarding the placement of a strobe light on the antenna tower. (In this case, none is required.) FAA approval has not yet been received, but is required to be on file before authorization is given, and, in the case of a cellular site, FCC approval is granted after the site has been constructed and "turned on."

II. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

A. The Proposed Action

The primary purpose for this project is the construction of a 75′ monopole with radio cabinets mounted on a 10′ x 15′ concrete slab. The monopole and cabinets would be within a fenced 30′ x 30′ area. The fence surrounding the compound will be chain link with 2 1/8" posts spaced on 10′ intervals and will be set in concrete. The fabric will be attached with ties to the posts. The top of the posts will have three strands of barbed wire to prevent livestock and large wildlife from entering the site, and to protect the applicant from liability for human intrusion or vandalism of the communications equipment and tower. The fence will be kept locked. This new facility will be built next to and adjacent to an existing US Cellular facility that has been in existence since December 5, 1996.

The conduit running from the US Cellular compound will be 2 to 3 inch schedule 40 PVC and will be buried at a 3 foot depth and covered with 1 foot of sand. At this point a warning tape will be placed on the sand and the trench will be filled in 1 foot lifts and compacted. This process will continue until the trench is completely filled. The length of the trench is approximately 80′.

The site area will need to be excavated using a track hoe to cut the bank and fill the compound/lease area. Estimated material to be moved would be in the 300 + yard range. The General Contractor will dig with a backhoe over to the existing transformer in the US Cellular site for the conduit run to this new site for power. Most of the spoils will be used in the compound area. No spoils would be sidecast or placed on or along the edge of the access road. The access road would not be widened in this area. Any additional spoils would be hauled away from the area to an authorized landfill.

Once the compound area is leveled and compacted, the foundation for the monopole will be dug using the track hoe or backhoe. Most of the spoils will be used within the compound area or be hauled to an authorized landfill as previously mentioned. Once the hole is dug to depth, the foundation mats and cages will be placed and foundations forms

for the top of the foundation will be set. The forms for the equipment pad and generator pad will be placed at this time and concrete will be poured. Estimated total yardage would be approximately 40 to 50 yards. That is an estimate of 5 to 6 truck loads. Once the concrete has cured and has passed the testing phase, the monopole will be set in place. During the concrete curing phase, the electrical service work will take place.

Exposed soil and disturbed areas would be seeded to a mixture appropriate to the site. No drainage ditches or waterbars are expected to be needed. The monopole will be hauled up by truck and trailer in sections and will be assembled on site. A boom truck will be needed to stack the pole. After which, the installation of the antenna system and related hardware will begin. No special equipment is required to complete this portion of the project, however, there will be pickup trucks and utility trailers to haul and store equipment during the build. As the equipment is installed, the fence and gravel for the compound area will be installed. Approximately 30 to 35 yards of ¾ minus gravel will be placed at the site. This material will be brought by dump truck. The construction time line is approximately one month from start to finish.

B. Alternatives

One alternative considered is a No Action. In this case, the application would be denied, and the project would not be constructed.

Another alternative would be for VoiceStream Wireless to co-locate with US Cellular in the compound. By co-locating with US Cellular, no new construction would be necessary outside the existing compound. However, there may not be enough room within the US Cellular compound to adequately construct another tower and add equipment without interference. By locating next to the current site, both companies have the opportunity to serve the community and minimize any interference problems. Because of the limited space this alternative was dismissed.

III. Environmental Impacts

A. Proposed Action

1. General Setting

The proposed cellular site would be placed next to and along side US Cellular's existing cellular site, which lies near the summit of Gold Hill, approximately 4½ air miles southeast of Durkee, in Baker County, Oregon. Interstate Highway 84 runs northwest to southeast about a mile west and south of the site. Gold Hill is a fairly prominent hill at the south end of Durkee Valley, on the east side of the upper entrance to the Burnt River Canyon below Durkee.

The proposed site occupies a small area on a short ridge running west off

the northwest summit of Gold Hill (there are two summits; the other one is a few hundred feet to the southeast). The elevation at the site is approximately 4100 feet.

The dirt road to the site leaves the Plano Road about 2 miles east of its exit from I-84. It runs across about ½ mile of privately owned land before entering public land. It then runs up to the site and along the edge of it, then continues down and over a lower summit and ends at a guzzler (for livestock water) in a saddle about .4 mile northwest of the subject site. This road is narrow, moderately steep, has some sharp switchbacks, and clings to the side of steep slopes on a "cat cut" for much of its length, but it is in good shape and easy to negotiate.

Access to the site is by a dirt road (BLM primitive road No. 6657) from the Plano road (Baker County Road No. 914) to and beyond the site. This road is easily passable, in dry weather, in a 4-wheel drive vehicle. Length of the road (the public land portion) is about 7800 feet; width is about 12 to 15 feet. US Cellular completed maintenance and more improvements on the road during construction of its cellular site in 1997.

The powerline route leaves the Plano Road line about 2½ miles east of I-84 and runs directly up to the last switchback on the road. There is already electrical power to the US Cellular site via a buried powerline. The line comes off an existing overhead line running along Plano road and runs cross country up to the site. The BLM portion of the route runs up a steep ridge to the road at the last upper switchback turn, then along the side of the road to the site. Length of the line on public land is about 3800 feet.

Please also see the map attached to this report.

2. Critical Elements

The following Critical Elements are not present, or will not be affected by the Proposed Action and will not be discussed: Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, Drinking/Ground Water, Native American Treaty Rights/Religious Concerns, Prime/Unique Farmlands, Wetlands/Riparian, Environmental Justice, Floodplains, Special Status Animals, Special Status Fish, Solid/Hazardous Wastes, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Wilderness.

The remaining Critical Elements are present, or will otherwise merit additional discussion.

Air Quality: Dust will be raised during construction at the site. Any

effects on Air Quality will be insignificant, highly localized, and short term. Once the work is completed, the effects will clear up immediately.

Cultural/Historic Resources: A cultural resource clearance of the area, conducted in 1995 for US Cellular's project, did not reveal the presence of any significant cultural resources that would be affected by the project.

Special Status Plants: A BLM-approved botanist conducted pedestrian surveys of the area in July, 1995. These surveys did not reveal the presence of any sensitive plant species.

3. Other Environmental Components

Vegetation: Vegetation at the site is sagebrush - grassland type. Major overstory species are big sagebrush, green rabbitbrush, gray rabbitbrush, and horsebrush. Important grass species are bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue, and Thurber's needlegrass.

Vegetation on the compound site would be disturbed and or destroyed, and that immediately adjacent to the site would be disturbed.

Vegetation lost would be partially replaced by the reseeding measures, but the species composition would probably change.

Soils: According to the Baker County Soil Survey, north slopes in the project area are occupied by Lovline channery loam, and south slopes by a complex of Snaker channery loam and Darkcanyon very channery loam. The Lovline and Darkcanyon soils are moderately deep, the Snaker soil is shallow. All soils have a high or moderately high hazard of water erosion.

The soils at the cellular site appear to be the Snaker soil. Soils here are shallow with some surface rock, small boulders, and some minor rock outcrop.

Construction at the site would create some soil disturbance and dislocation. Leveling of the site would be required and additional spoils would be used in the compound area. Any removal of vegetation would expose these erosive soils to erosion. The proposed reseeding and drainage measures would mitigate these impacts.

Wildlife Habitat: The area is within seasonal mule deer range and is occupied by a variety of songbirds and small mammals. There would be an insignificant loss of habitat and some temporary frightening away during construction by the noise and presence of workers and equipment.

Range Resources: The area lies within Sisley Creek Allotment #1069, permitted to the Bunch Family Trust and Lazy S over 7 Inc. for cattle. Grazing intensity at the proposed site appears to be very light, and the range is in good condition.

The cellular site is probably a loafing area for a few head and may have been a salt location at one time, but not recently. About .1 acre would be fenced out of the allotment, and an insignificant amount of forage would no longer be available. There would be no reductions or any other changes in the permitted use resulting from this project.

Visual Resources: The area is rated Class III for visual resource management. In this class, activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer.

The summit of Gold Hill is visible from I-84. It is especially visible as one descends into Durkee Valley, coming from Baker, and on to the Durkee exit, as the highway is aiming generally toward Gold Hill. Beyond Durkee, the highway heads to the right of Gold Hill, and the Hill will "move" to the traveler's left. As the highway approaches the lower end of Durkee Valley, the view of the summit is blocked by an intervening, lower summit. The summit is also visible from I-84 for a short distance, approaching from the southeast, in the Weatherby area. The existing US Cellular facility is visible but does not dominate the view or attract attention unless the sunlight happens to reflect off the chain link fence. The addition of the proposed facility is not expected to impact the visual resource.

Mineral Resources: Mining claims are present in the area. The cellular site may lie within one or more unpatented claims. The applicant has consulted with the claimant to ensure that the project will not unreasonably interfere with the claimant's activities. The claims are a pre-existing right; un-resolvable conflicts are not anticipated, but should they occur, the cellular facility would have to be changed or removed.

Access: Access would not be affected. The road to the site does not provide legal access to the general public since it crosses private land between Plano Road and public land. The private land is posted against trespassing, but there are no physical barriers or locked gates on the road.

Socio-Economic: This project would result in additional cellular phone service coverage and improved telephone communications on I-84 between Pendleton and Ontario. This could have beneficial implications for the safety of travelers involved in accidents, vehicle trouble, or other emergencies.

4. Cumulative Effects

Some intermittent mining activity occurs in the area, which has an effect on various resources, such as vegetation, soil, wildlife habitat, and livestock forage. At present, this activity is very small scale and there is no expectation that it will increase significantly. The cumulative impacts of this activity and the Proposed Action would be insignificant.

B. No Action

Under this alternative, the project would not be constructed and the above impacts would not occur. Cellular telephone service on I-84 would not be improved or the applicant would have to choose another site. Another site would likely be less satisfactory in the coverage provided and more expensive to develop. Access may have to be constructed and the powerline route may be much longer, resulting in more total ecosystem impacts. This facility will be built right next to an existing facility where there is already a road and power in place.

IV. Mitigating Measures

The holder should comply with all specifications and mitigating measures included in the Plan of Development, including adequate drainage. These measures will replace destroyed vegetation, provide soil protection, and lessen the visibility of the project.

The holder should be made responsible for control of weeds resulting from the project.

Construction should not occur during wet or soft conditions to avoid excessive rutting and soil compaction.

Excess excavated soil should be spread evenly within the right-of-way area. This will reduce visibility and minimize soil movement.

V. Residual Impacts

A small amount of vegetation will be destroyed. It will be partially replaced by the seeding measures, though with a different species mixture than is there now.

Some soil will be disturbed and displaced. There is a possibility of some erosion but it will be minimized by mitigating measures.

The facility will be visible to careful observers on I-84.

Cellular phone service on I-84 will improve.

All other impacts will be negligible.

VI. Persons/Agencies Consulted

Steve Davidson BLM Realty Specialist
Judy Reese Minerals/Geology
Susie Manezes BLM Realty Specialist
Craig Martell, Livestock Management
Clair Button, Botany/T & E Plants
Greg Miller, Wildlife/T &E Animals
Steve Coley, Air Quality/Fire Management/Hazmat
Mary Oman, Cultural/Tribal/Paleo
Todd Kuck, Farmland/Soil
Polly Gribskov, Recreation/Visual
Mike Woods, Noxious Weeds
Ted Davis, Environmental Justice/PE Coordinator
Dick Thompson, Communications
US Cellular Existing communication's site